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SUBJECT: LEBANON: MINISTER OF INTERIOR BAROUD: "I CONSULTED WIDELY BEFORE SYRIA TRIP"

Classified By: Ambassador Michele J. Sison for reasons 1.4 (b) and (d).

Summary

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¶1. (C) On November 14, Minister of Interior Ziad Baroud told the Ambassador that his November 10 visit to Syria had been approved -- prior to departure -- by the Council of Ministers and that he had furthermore consulted with a range of political figures, including via a call to Saad Hariri in Moscow. With the exception of Minister of State Nassib Lahoud, other political figures chose to air their concerns and criticisms in the media rather than in official settings.

Indeed, PM Siniora confirmed to the press on November 14 that this visit had been pre-approved. Baroud said he would not respond to the criticisms publicly (even those from the March 14 Secretariat), but would file a full report on his visit and answer questions during the cabinet meeting scheduled for Saturday, November 15.

¶2. (C) In terms of the spring 2009 parliamentary elections, Baroud also said that he was pessimistic about the chances for independent political figures to gain a significant number of seats. "It's practically impossible without proportional representation." However, he did think it would be important to support independent candidates, even those who had little chance of winning in their districts, in order to build a national profile for these figures. He also confirmed that President Sleiman did not intend to form an independent bloc for the upcoming elections. "It is too risky and could be used to weaken his status as a national leader." End Summary.

Exchange with Syrian Counterparts Was Frank, But Productive

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¶3. (C) Meeting with Ambassador and Special Assistant in his office, Baroud stated that he was, in fact, the only Minister since 1990 who had actually received Council of Ministers approval prior to a visit to Syria. He also said he was careful to include in his delegation Internal Security Forces General Ashraf Rifi and the Director General of Securite General, Wafiq Jezzini, not only because they had technical expertise on border security and other agenda items, but also because they are representatives of the Sunni and Shia

confessional communities, respectively.

¶ 14. (C) Baroud said that Rifi was initially hesitant about traveling to Syria, citing concerns about possible Syrian retaliation against his own family if negotiations become difficult. Baroud said that they would be traveling as a group and that he, as head of the delegation, would not let Rifi stand alone if there were any threats issued. Baroud also said that he was extremely frank in his discussions, but described the Syrian response as "positive" in regards to border security cooperation. "I don't think they really plan to cross the borders and roll back into Lebanon militarily. It wouldn't make sense for them, given the current international environment."

¶ 15. (C) Baroud told us that he would fully brief the Council of Ministers the following day on his visit. "This was a fact-finding mission and I am not proposing a new bi-national security commission, as has been reported in the press. However, I would like a formal mechanism with technical border and security experts who can further explore the issues that were discussed at a political level. I don't have the expertise for this, but General Rifi does and he is the government's point person on border issues. However, any further discussions or committees would have to be approved by the Council of Ministers first."

Political Backlash Disappointing, As Baroud Had Consulted With Council Before Visit

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¶ 16. (C) On November 12, the March 14 Secretariat issued a communiqué that stated, "After hearing the 'explanations' presented by the Interior Minister on his trip to Damascus, the Secretariat voices a strong reservation over the formation of security cooperation committees between the two countries, especially in wake of the suspicious intentions of the Syrian regime when it accused Lebanon of being behind Fatah al-Islam." The communiqué also rejected any type of coordination under the auspices of the Higher Syrian-Lebanese Council and called for no decisions to be taken before diplomatic relations are fully completed, including the exchange of ambassadors.

¶ 17. (C) Baroud was put off by this response, especially because during the November 4 meeting where the visit was discussed and approved, only Nassib Lahoud addressed the group about his reservations. "Nassib Lahoud thoughtfully presented his concerns about the Higher Syrian-Lebanese Council, which were taken into account while preparing briefing papers for the visits. Not one other person came forward in that venue with reservations or concerns -- instead, they used the media to air their complaints." Baroud characterized other figures who had criticized him as "people with small agendas." Mentioning Mohammed Kabara, Baroud said Kabara was angry that he had refused to place an unqualified person recommended by Kabara onto the Ministry's payroll.

¶ 18. (C) Baroud also told us that he had personally telephoned Saad Hariri, who was in the middle of his Moscow visit, to discuss the purpose of the discussions with Syria. "Saad told me he had no objections," said Baroud. PM Siniora also publicly supported Baroud by telling the press that the cabinet had approved the visit before Baroud departed. The next Council of Ministers meeting was rescheduled for Saturday, November 15 so that President Sleiman could preside upon his return from the United States. Baroud told us that there were 64 agenda items for the November 15 meeting, but he was preparing to give a formal report and answer questions "in this official venue, as it should be."

Ministry Moving Forward With Election Preparations

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¶9. (C) Baroud wants to create a new image for the upcoming elections. "We didn't get all of the electoral reforms we wanted, but we should give the Lebanese people a sense that things have changed and improved. I am working on new branding and information outlets for the elections, as people have lost respect for the Ministry of Interior over the years." (Note: Eli Khoury, of Saatchi and Saatchi and NowLebanon.com, told us earlier this month that he was assisting Baroud on this rebranding effort. End Note) Baroud also said that he personally met with the 47 officials charged with issuing national voter identification cards. He wanted to stress the importance of this initiative and to tell the officials that this was one of his highest personal priorities for the Spring 2009 elections. Finally, he told us that the Council of Ministers had granted Baroud permission to hire an additional 146 employees to help prepare for the elections.

Minimal Gains for Independent Candidates in 2009?

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¶10. (C) Baroud questioned whether moderate political figures like himself could gain a significant number of "independent" parliamentary seats in the upcoming election. "When Doha signed away the possibility for proportional representation in 2009, hope was lost. The law, as written, states that you have to be part of a list." Baroud also quipped that these should really be referred to as by-elections, as it was clear which side would win in about half of the 128 districts. He is fairly certain that no coalition will win a two-thirds majority and predicts that Lebanese politics will continue to function in "shades of gray" with true progress ruled out and

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the likelihood of stalemates continuing. (Note: March 14 planning is to recruit a number of "independent" Christian candidates who would run in key Christian swing districts in which Aoun's FPM party currently dominates. End Note)

¶11. (C) According to Baroud, President Sleiman did not plan to form an independent bloc for the upcoming elections. "The most he would be able to gain would be 4-5 seats and you really need 10-12 seats to exert any influence. If he took this chance, he could lose his status as a national figure and become known as someone who only really controls a small parliamentary bloc."

¶12. (C) Baroud then said that, regardless of their chances for success in 2009, independent political figures should still be supported during the campaign season. "Even if they only win a portion of the vote, it will raise their profiles on the national scene and begin to solidify their political futures." Baroud concluded by saying, "We will work differently with the independent candidates after these elections, but the time is not right for them given the high levels of polarization in this country today."

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